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# Food symbolism: Why do we give food meaning?

By Anna-Louise Taylor  
BBC News

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**Dishes eaten at Chinese New Year carry great significance, as does the way a Burns Night supper is presented. But these are not the only meals which represent something to diners and the reasons we attach meaning are as myriad as the food itself.**

It seems odd that a small parcel of tasty filling encased in a light dough wrapper can represent so much.

But the jiaozi dumpling symbolises prosperity to diners, who traditionally sit down for a family feast on the eve of Chinese New Year. It also means wealth when the dumpling is crescent shaped, like the gold ingot once used in ancient China as money.

Chinese chef Ching-He Huang says the centuries-old "lucky" food traditions come from superstitions about feeding the spiritual world, legends and history.

"For example, the bamboo glutinous rice, zongzi, was eaten to commemorate a famed poet. These rice dumplings were thrown in a river so the fish would feed on the rice instead of his corpse, because he threw himself into the river and he was a well-loved poet and patriot of the people," she says.

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Fuchsia Dunlop, BBC journalist and author of the Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook, says many of the meanings given to Chinese food are homophones of their names in Mandarin.

"In the Chinese language, so many different characters have the same sound and it is ripe for word play. For instance nian gao - which is a new year's cake - also means tall or high, so it

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**BBC Food blog: Dumplings**

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is eaten to represent doing better or reaching higher every year," she says.

Steamed fish, which is a staple of many suppers, is served as a dish called nian nian you yu, the word for fish "yu", being a homophone of "surplus" and "abundance". It must be whole to symbolise completeness and good fortune.

Noodles represent a long life and autumn moon cakes are eaten to celebrate the roundness of the moon. Oranges are thought to symbolise wealth and tangerines good luck.

"The lunar new year is the biggest festival of the year in China," says Dunlop. "An important element of it is for the whole family to be together, with people coming back to the provinces to share in the holiday."

It is this togetherness that has perpetuated the popularity of the meal, says Huang.

"It's a celebration of past, present and future. A big family gathering and a great excuse to eat great food. Eating is a social occasion in China because Chinese food is cooked in a way that is specifically for sharing, with lots of dishes at the dinner table."

So a chicken must be served whole to symbolise family unity and togetherness, and whole roasted animals symbolise fidelity. Sweet, steamed cakes are also eaten as the sweetness symbolises a rich, sweet life and the round shape signifies family reunion.

By Charmaine MokChef

Auspicious dishes such as whole steamed fish are stalwarts in my family of Cantonese eaters, but we also adore the northern Chinese tradition of eating dumplings (called jiaozi in Mandarin) to ensure a plentiful and prosperous year ahead.

In a time of austerity, I can't think of anything better - or more economical - to eat and make than dumplings.

**Read more from Charmaine Mok**

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Prof Michael Owen Jones wrote in a research paper for the American Folklore Society that people "define events through food". He says individuals may also define themselves by the food they prepare, serve and consume, while symbols can evoke emotions.

If people do associate food with feelings and identity, celebratory meals will always remain part of human culture.

But history and custom also play a large part. Food historian Annie Gray says food symbolism has a lot to do with religion and eating "celebration" food at the end of periods of fasting.

This is how pancakes started to be eaten on Shrove Tuesday - to use up rich foodstuffs before the Christian period of fasting known as Lent. Easter food also developed this way.

"Easter fell at the end of what was known as 'the hungry month' in Medieval England - a period of fasting," says Gray. "People were able to get lamb, symbolising the lamb of God. Hens also began

laying eggs, which symbolise rebirth and immortality again after winter."

After Henry VIII came to power and separated the Church of England from the Catholic Church, fasting became more about promoting trade with "fish days". But she says that in England, "even after the Reformation we kept hold of these traditions".

"Chocolate eggs didn't come in until the 1870s. It was in the 18th and 19th Century that a lot of religious 'giving up' ended. Christmas became about using up things people couldn't preserve over new year."

She says many people now "have very little religious motivation" when eating certain food, often what is eaten now "is about supermarkets and shops pushing certain products".

"Not many people have original Easter foods anymore, like the traditional lamb on a Sunday. Turkey only became traditional (at Christmas) in the 1960s."

The ritual during festivals can also give the dishes meaning, such as on Burns Night in Scotland.

Burns Night suppers began in 1801, when friends of the late Scottish poet **Robert Burns** gathered together to celebrate his life and his poetry. They recited his **Address to a Haggis** and feasted on the offal, oatmeal and spices wrapped in a sheep's stomach. It started what has since become a national tradition, although there are some variations to how the supper is celebrated.

Prof Gerard Carruthers, Glasgow University's co-director of the Centre for Robert Burns Studies, says haggis was actually invented by the Chinese, but took on its "power" after Burns died.

## Chinese homophones

- Steamed fish - the Mandarin word for fish is "yu" and the phrase "nian nian you yu" is a popular Chinese New Year greeting. "Yu" also means abundance, so the phrase means: "Every year may you have abundance"
- "Fa cai" or "black moss" - a seaweed dish also sounds like "fa cai" - to prosper
- Apples - because the Mandarin word for apple is "ping", and "ping an" means peace
- Nian gao - sweet sticky glutinous rice cake, dipped in egg batter. Nian gao is also part of the phrase "nian nian sheng gao" meaning "every year you rise up the ranks". "Nian" also means "sticky", so you will stick with loved ones through thick and thin

"Burns's poem to the haggis - it's comical, but also serious. In the 18th Century, he felt people were too luxurious and eating too many luxuries, so his message was 'keep it simple'."

Scottish chef Shirley Spear says haggis is a very rustic Scottish dish.

"Burns was a farmer's son and the haggis and vegetables served with it have strong association with the land. It's a symbol of a humble life. Burns became a world renowned poet but had humble beginnings. It also symbolises his approach to life, meaning every person is worth his own salt. It's about the simple man."

The ritual of piping in the haggis, reciting the poem and plunging the knife in to the dish before serving it out stems back to peasant one-pot dishes which are shared, she says.

The stabbing of the haggis also mimics the idea of Scottish aggression and military power, says Prof Carruthers.

"The early Burns suppers were at a time when Britain was at war with France, so the idea was: 'Let's have a bit of fun in gloomy times.' Burns's poem is about celebrating the haggis, but this stabbing also had Masonic undertones. All these things are in the mix."

But over the course of time, symbolism can change and food myths can spring up, says Gray. Many of which need "debunking". Take simnel cake, which is usually baked and eaten during the Easter period.

"People associate with it servants having a day off, also that it was made for Mothering Sunday and had balls on the top to represent Jesus and his disciples. None of it is true."

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## Burns Night Supper:

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Traditional to serve:

- Cock-a-leekie soup
- Haggis, neeps & tatties ("Haggis wi' bashit neeps an' champit tatties")
- Cloutie Dumpling (a pudding prepared in a linen cloth or clout) or Topsy Laird (a Scottish sherry trifle)
- Whisky

## What happens on Burns Night?

## Burns Night recipes

So where do such myths come from? They can usually be traced back to one era - the Victorians, she says. They were "very good at telling tall stories".

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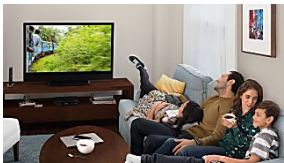
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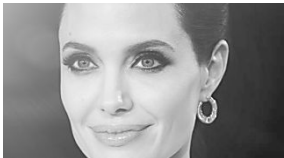
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